



Fact Sheet No. 12: Online Workbooks

Overview

Similar to a survey, an online workbook aims to gather information and opinions, but also provides **contextual information**, scenarios and facts to help respondents make informed decisions. Workbooks may invite users to suggest solutions to a set of problems or challenges. They can be used to educate the public as well. This approach is particularly useful when dealing with strategic directions or value-based decisions, where a common knowledge base must first be established among the respondents.

Respondents use a workbook to progress through information and tasks divided into sections or modules. They will typically read a short text and some pro and con arguments on a topic and then answer related questions before moving on to the next module. Some workbooks allow the respondent to move back and forth within the modules and modify answers as opinions are developed.

Although workbooks are completed individually, it is possible to combine this online tool with others such as online discussions, where participants can exchange views and ask questions to help form their opinion.

Key Considerations

- Online workbooks are powerful tools for **informing, gathering, discussing** and **engaging**, which help develop the area of interest and increase the response rate.
- A workbook is essentially a publication with specific checkpoints where participants are asked to react to the information provided.
- Workbooks promote **two-way learning**: the respondent learns about the issue, and the sponsor learns about the respondent's values and priorities.
- Online workbooks should include any background information that users will require to make an informed decision.
- Workbooks reduce the costs of a consultation: an online workbook can engage thousands of participants for the cost of 50 in-person consultations.
- Workbooks have a higher completion rate (70% to 85%) than traditional surveys (5% to 15%).
- Involving key stakeholders in the design can help build trust and buy-in and ensures that the workbook is audience-appropriate.

Some Challenges

Avoid verbosity and jargon, so that respondents can comfortably answer the question or complete the tasks at hand without having to seek out supplementary content from the library or the Internet.

The modules, typical of workbooks, must contain sufficient concise information to ensure that participants are adequately prepared to answer the questions, without feeling overwhelmed by the information. Achieving this balance can be a daunting task, but one must remember that an online reader behaves differently than his/her offline counterpart.

There is a trend towards real-time surveys, where respondents can view others' opinions and compare or change their response according to others' arguments. Offering this capacity may involve more sophisticated technology and more opinion tracking during the course of the survey to watch for arguments that can sway a common opinion.

Although Internet penetration is fairly high, there is still a significant digital divide, and those who self-select to participate in online workbooks may have a different demographic background than that of the average Canadian (a higher education, for example). It may not be beneficial to apply the workbook results to the general population as a whole if one wants a random population sample.

Because of the time commitment required to complete an online workbook, paper or downloadable versions should be made available to respondents with limited Internet access.

Application

Online workbooks are often better than a typical survey when there is a large amount of information to be shared with participants. Workbooks are an effective way of delivering manageable portions of contextual information to respondents.

Online workbooks are most effectively used when participants are uninformed about the issue. They can be very helpful in identifying opinions, clarifying value-based ideas and defining concepts that are misunderstood.

This tool can be used in the analysis, creation and implementation stages of policy development, when there is a need to inform and educate participants about the project under way, to ensure that policy development is founded on accurate and engaged contributions.

Examples of Use

The Government of Ontario's Mortgage and Housing Association used a workbook in 2004 to gather opinions on a legislative reform to protect tenants and promote a healthy private rental housing market. The self-selected audience participated through town hall meetings, telephone submissions, questionnaires, and written submissions. The Association processed the collected information through a database and produced a report to help policy makers develop a legislative renewal of the Tenant Protection Act.

The Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada employed this technology in the spring of 2002 to gather information from

self-selected Canadians. The purpose of the nine "Issue/Survey Papers" was to help Canadians make informed decisions about the future of Canada's health care system. Each of the papers explored potential courses of action to address key health care challenges and asked respondents to express their preferences on proposed solutions.

The papers were divided into modules, one for each proposed course of action, and presented respondents with definitions and arguments for and against the proposition. Participants were asked to answer closed-ended questions for each module and provide demographic information for analysis purposes.

Although a small proportion of respondents mailed their responses, the majority of the 18,000 workbooks were completed online. The Commission found that the surveys that were posted online for a longer period of time attracted the greatest number of respondents. The results helped the Commission identify the values Canadians placed in the health care system, and the ensuing report became an important and valuable resource for policy development in the health care sector.

Complementary Tools

Web-based discussions, forums and document-sharing tools

These processes allow participants to submit postings or documents on a given topic. The posts, organized in threads, can be viewed and responded to by all, which results in an asynchronous discussion. A Q&A forum could help clarify any ambiguities in a workbook, which could in turn elicit higher response rates.

Live chat

A live chat could provide a forum for respondents to deliberate on workbook issues.

This fact sheet presents ideas from the Innovatec Conferences "Practical Applications of eConsultations" held in February 2004 and "Content Analysis in Online Consultation" held in January 2005. Full reports are available from the

Online Consultation Technologies Centre of Expertise

www.onlineconsultation.gc.ca

